

PLANTING THE FUTURE

cooperation involving local governments and researchers



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Summary

The **FUTURE** project was initiated by the Porto Metropolitan Area Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCE Porto) and addresses two documented priorities at the regional context: the need to improve the **natural capital**, particularly native woodlands (which underpin a broader environmental quality), and the need to expand on the **social capital**, specifically through the creation of social networks that facilitate the action, cooperation and public participation required to move the region towards sustainability.

The project, collaboratively designed and managed, comprises the creation of 100 hectares of native woodlands in the region (100,000 trees) until 2015 and, simultaneously, the setting up of a group of citizens that are aware, skilled and motivated enough to promote and care for these native woodlands in close cooperation with regional organizations.



Background

The **Porto Metropolitan Area** is a 1,575 square km territory in northern Portugal. About 16% of the Portuguese population lives in the area (1.67 million people). The area is structured around the municipality of Porto with 15 other municipalities included, namely: Arouca, Espinho, Gondomar, Maia, Matosinhos, Oliveira de Azeméis, Póvoa de Varzim, S. João da Madeira, Santa Maria da Feira, Santo Tirso, Trofa, Vale de Cambra, Valongo, Vila do Conde, Vila Nova de Gaia.

The Porto Metropolitan Area **Environmental Strategic Plan**, a broad participatory regional planning process conducted from 2003 to 2008, concluded that citizens, decision-makers, researchers, experts and government staff consider forest ecosystem management a major environmental challenge in the region, to a large extent because of forest fires. It also identified the need to improve riverside areas and enhance the natural corridors effect. Education and training for sustainability as well as the need for more and better inter-municipality cooperation also came up as a priority issue.

The plan integrates the contributions of more than 5,500 citizens and 300 organizations and represents a shared view of the environmental challenges and solutions for the region. It was considered a case study by ICLEI.

The Porto Metropolitan Area **Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development** (RCE Porto) was established in 2009 to address the regional environmental priorities that came out of the plan. It was a logical step for stakeholders to advance in dialogue, learning and action. An RCE is a network of existing formal, non-formal and informal education organizations, mobilized to deliver education for sustainable development to local and regional communities (there are currently 116 RCEs worldwide acknowledged by the United Nations University). RCE Porto is coordinated by the Catholic University of Portugal in partnership with Local Governments (Metropolitan Area executive board).

In 2010, RCE Porto's executive board decided that in 2011, which was the International Year of Forests and European Year of Volunteering, members should create and manage a flagship project to reforest the region with native species, making a difference in the territory (improving natural capital) and creating training and action opportunities for citizens (enhancing social capital).

This was the seed for the **FUTURE – the 100,000 trees project**. The initiative, collaboratively designed and managed, comprises the creation of 100 hectares of native woodlands in the region (100,000 trees) until 2015.

Outcomes

After year two, **23,340 native trees were planted** in 21 areas within the region, totaling 60 hectares. After the interventions, these new woodland areas accommodate more than 20 species of native trees and shrubs, for example *Quercus robur*, *Castanea sativa*, *Crataegus monogyna*, *Corylus avellana*, *Arbutus unedo*, *Acer monspessulanum*, *Betula celtiberica*, *Ulmus minor*, *Ilex aquifolium*, *Fraxinus sp.*, *Alnus glutinosa*, *Sambucus nigra*, *Laurus nobilis*, *Prunus lusitanica*, *Quercus suber*, *Pinus pinea* and *Viburnum tinus*. The ecological characteristics of each area is taken into account when selecting each species.

The tree survival rate in the areas examined after summer 2012 is around 70%. The **environmental results** have not been quantified but it is expected that biodiversity, the soil's biocapacity and water regulation improve and that about 125 tons of carbon dioxide are stored per hectare planted per year (annual average for a 40 year period).

From the **social capital perspective** (civic engagement and social connectedness) several outcomes are to be highlighted. As a consequence of the collaborative design, the project is currently managed with a “zero budget”, relying exclusively on stakeholders' resources. There are 35 organizations enrolled: municipalities, landowners, forestry, environmental and social non-governmental organizations, companies, governmental organizations, education institutions and political parties. Several of these organizations are officially in charge of woodland management, allowing the project a good degree of sustainability.

Public participation in the project has been surprisingly positive: 3,425 participation records were registered in tree planting and caring (123 activities) totaling 10,045 volunteer hours. A long term commitment to give 40 hours per year to the project was assumed by 132 people (stewardship program named “Forest Curators”). Besides, more than 100 people attended a “Forest Ambassadors” training course.

Since 2012 the FUTURE is being replicated elsewhere in the country. The Common Forest (a nationwide program promoted by a non-governmental organization and the government office for nature protection and forests) was launched in March 2012 and its guidelines and procedures reflect the lessons learned over the development of this project.

These results show that moving towards sustainability through a two-prong approach (simultaneous enhancement of social and natural capital) anchored on an agreed tangible goal is desirable and possible.

